

Body Fragrance
2 Corinthians 2:14-16
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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¹⁴But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. ¹⁵For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? (NRSV)

I

40 years ago, shortly after the Vietnam War ended, the Holdeman Mennonite Church near Wakarusa, grappled with the issue of body odor. The issue of body odor came up when the congregation resettled a family of refugees from Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War, badly managed by the United States, had created hundreds of thousands of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, many of whom wanted to leave Southeast Asia and begin a new life in the U.S. The Holdeman congregation decided to help by resettling one Southeast Asian family in Wakarusa. They housed the family in the parsonage, donated money and furniture, started English lessons, and helped the father and mother find jobs in local businesses.

Soon the issue of body odor surfaced. People began whispering in private that the refugee family smelled different. The smell was unlike the smell of anyone else in the congregation. Finally after weeks of furtive whispers, someone figured out the source of the smell: it was garlic and fish sauce. Coming from Southeast Asia with its lovely, fragrant cuisines, the family used lots of garlic and fish sauce in their cooking. The garlic and fish sauce permeated the family's house, saturated their clothing, and emanated from the pores of their skin.

However, family from Southeast Asia weren't the only ones with body odor. When they first settled into the Holdeman church parsonage, they mostly ate vegetables and rice, with little or no meat. By contrast, the people of the Holdeman congregation ate lots of meat, at least once a day, sometimes twice a day, even three times a day. Meat eaters are generally oblivious to this, but they carry the smell of meat on their bodies. Vegans

and vegetarians know this because they can sometimes smell it. When the family from Southeast Asian walked into the Holdeman church building for Sunday worship, and especially for Sunday potlucks, they were assaulted by the powerful, odiferous smell of beef, ham, and chicken. Eventually everyone adjusted and learned to like each other's cuisines. The Holdeman members, or their descendants, now eat garlic and fish sauce. The refugee family, or their descendants, now eats meat.

But another kind of body odor was being spread around too—the fragrance of mission. People in the community had their noses to the wind, and what they smelled was the aroma of Christ wafting through the air. They smelled the fragrance of a church hosting immigrants, caring for aliens, reaching out to strangers.

II

In a letter to the church in Corinth, Paul writes that we the church are the aroma of Christ in the world. Anyone in the world who puts their noses to the wind can smell us. It is as if the church is marching through the streets of the city in a kind of triumphal procession, led by Christ himself. As we march through the streets, the aroma of Christ passes through our collective body and wafts gently through the air. Any bystander can smell us, so that the smell we give off becomes part of our mission.

Hopefully for better but sometimes for worse, the body of Christ always gives off some kind of smell. If the church isn't doing the job we should be doing, then we might be giving off an unsavory body odor. In those cases bystanders may say, "Oh, those people don't smell like Christ at all!" But if we live and express the mission of God, then we give off the precious, pungent fragrance of Christ. Bystanders then may say, "Ahh, that's nice. Just smell how wonderful that is!"

It's also possible that bystanders aren't getting much of a whiff at all. A long time ago in another city I lived near one of these churches that basically wasn't giving off any odor at all. This church was struggling to survive. It was founded in the 1940s with great expectations for the kind of mission it would do in its neighborhood. But the church had never prospered and was now down to maybe 15 people on a good Sunday. Most of them

were tired. Tired of struggling to be a church and not succeeding very well. Tired of not being able to meet the church budget. Tired of having no pastor. Tired of fighting with each other over women in leadership. Tired of meeting in a run-down church building they had no money to fix.

These internal challenges so overwhelmed them that their fragrance in the community was barely detectible. To be sure, neighbors around the church building knew very well that the church was there. But beyond the 5-8 cars parked in the church lot every Sunday morning, the neighbors barely detected a pulse in this dying body of Christ. They smelled almost nothing of Christ's sweet aroma because church members were too tired for mission. None of the members talked about their church to colleagues at work or friends in the broader community, for the simple reason that not many good or interesting things were happening at the church to talk about. A few people knew the church was there, but hardly anyone could smell it.

III

Contrast that struggling, odorless church with another Mennonite church I once knew. In late 1990, shortly after President George H.W. Bush sent American troops and tanks to begin the first Persian Gulf War, the members of this other congregation began to resist. Passionately committed to Jesus' way of peace, they were deeply troubled by the advent of this war. They participated in local ecumenical prayer services for peace. They encouraged their teenagers to write down their views on conscientious objection. They sent letters to officials in Washington. They drafted a congregational statement on peace.

In February 1991, in their monthly newsletter, the congregation printed a number of articles that revealed their disapproval of the war. The congregational chairperson in his article pointed out that "As . . . believers in Jesus Christ and followers of his teachings . . . we are often out of step with the national norm." The chairperson of the Peace and Justice Committee wrote that "Our nation is at war. I sat before the TV that first night, with pulse rate up, [a] 'hollow' feeling in [my] belly and [a] sense of panic waxing and

waning [in me]. . . . The shalom and wholeness to which Jesus calls us points evermore to the narrow, rocky path, the path he said the minority would take.”

A copy of that newsletter was mailed to Lance Corporal Axel Beynen, a member of the 3rd Marine Division of Operation Desert Shield, who was stationed somewhere in the Persian Gulf. A few years before this, Axel, then a teenager, had had attended this Mennonite church with his parents. By sending him their monthly newsletters the church was trying to stay in touch with him. When Axel read that particular issue of the newsletter, he was so vexed by their views on the war that he wrote a letter back to them. Let me read selections from the letter he wrote. I want you to hear the heartache Axel felt about disagreeing with people he liked, and about being in a place far from home.

“Dear [church],

“Ever since I came into the Marines I have gotten your newsletter. I guess the [February issue] is the first one I disagree with. At this moment I’m in my foxhole about 5 miles off the Kuwait border. . . . When we get shelled or bombed I run to my foxhole and dive into it. I’ve grown up on Mennonite teachings but I didn’t really realize what the meaning and word Mennonite meant till this newsletter. It hit [me] pretty hard. I guess I forfeited being a Mennonite when I came into the Marines. I can honestly tell you that I cannot pray for the people over the sand wall 5 miles away. The Bible says turn the other cheek [when somebody slaps you], but this Iraqi soldier isn’t going to slap me; he’s gonna try and kill me instead, if I don’t kill him first.

“With all this objector talk and anti-war talk are you serious? I know you are. I’m sure a lot of y’all don’t know this, but I had a little girl born August 25, 1990. [I haven’t seen her yet because] I’ve been overseas since last May. I’d like to see her soon, but I can’t if I turn my cheek.

“I’d love a peaceful solution also. It means I go home soon. To everyone who wrote, I thank you very much. I appreciate you taking time out and writing.

Sincerely, Axel Beynen”

A few months later, one of the lay leaders of the church responded in a semi-official capacity to Axel. As I read portions of her letter I hope you will again listen for the

pathos, for the sensitive wrestling to remain true to the church's ethical convictions while also extending compassion to Axel.

"Dear Axel,

"Thank you for your letter in February. It was very honest and clear and I thank you for that. Dialogue on these issues is exactly what is needed all the way around. You see, we pacifists have questions too. We believe pacifism is the right way, but we constantly have to challenge our way of thinking. It isn't easy to live by principles that don't have well-defined answers, but it's the only way to have a clear conscience.

"The question you raised about turning the other cheek is a good one. If I were attacked or my children threatened, you can be sure I would do something, if I could. I probably wouldn't kill someone, but maybe instincts would take over and I would. I do believe in scriptures which say we will not be tempted beyond our strength and that God often provides a way out. If God provides a way out, I assume it will be nonviolent. That is one reason why I would not choose to serve in the military, because in the military I would be placing myself in a position where I would not have a choice.

"Axel, you must be able to appreciate you hard it has been [for us pacifists] to keep up our morale during such a popular war. It was tempting to give up [our beliefs]. Many people think that pacifists become conscientious objectors because they are cowards. This is not true. It takes far more courage to go against the grain of society than to forsake your convictions and go with the flow.

"Congratulations on the birth of your daughter. You are always welcome back at our church. We value this kind of honest and open exchange. Axel, you may think our thoughts are foolish, but someone has to dream of a better world.

"The best to you and yours."

IV

I don't know about you, but I smell the aroma of Christ in that congregation and in those letters. It isn't an aroma of arrogant self-righteousness, but the aroma of an honest

struggle with religious convictions amid the ongoing messiness of the world. It's an aroma that hopes to be faithful to Christ while also wanting to extend compassion to particular people in particular situations.

Of course the question for us is this: What fragrance do you think Berkey Avenue Mennonite is giving off to bystanders? Is it rancid or sweet? How and where are we emitting the aroma of Christ? When have you smelled the aroma of Christ around here?